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## THE DRAMATIC UNITIES IN ENGLAND.

For the source of the dramatic unities, as for so many other things, we must go back to Aristotle. The passages that touch upon the unity of action are contained in the *Poetics*. As translated by Professor Butcher<sup>1</sup> these *loci* run as follows: "Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life, which cannot be reduced to unity, and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. Hence the error, as it appears, of all poets who have composed a *Heracleid*, a *Theseid*, or other poems of the kind. They imagine that as *Heracles* was one man, the story of *Heracles* must also be a unity." (P. VIII, 1 & 2.)<sup>2</sup> "A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end." (VII, 3.) "To define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad." (VII, 7.) "As therefore in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being the imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed or disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference is not an organic part of the whole." (VIII, 4.)

Of the unity of time Aristotle speaks but briefly: "Epic poetry and tragedy differ, again, in their length, for tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit, whereas the epic action has no limits of time." (V, 4.)

For the purposes of this study it is unnecessary to comment,

<sup>1</sup> Ed. of the *Poetics* (with trans. 1902).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. ch. XXIII, 1 & 4, where it is stated that unity of time, like unity of person, does not of itself bind events into a unity. (Professor Butcher.) Aristotle's views have added light thrown on them when studied in conjunction with the principles laid down by Plato in the *Phaedrus*.

at the present moment, on Aristotle's doctrine of the Major Unity, i. e., action.<sup>3</sup> One remark of Prof. Butcher's, however, it is desirable to bear in mind throughout our discussion: "Unity in Aristotle is the principle of limit, without which an object loses itself in the *ἄπειρον*, the region of the undefined, the indeterminate, the accidental. By means of unity the plot becomes individual and also intelligible."<sup>4</sup> Because of this service performed by the unity of plot or action, it has been admitted, with very generous latitude and with no common acceptance as to meaning, by many dramatists.<sup>5</sup> The Greek notion of the unity of time, however, and its companion, of place, require some explanation here.

To begin with, these two minor unities are not, strictly speaking, a doctrine with Aristotle; they are "a rough generalization as to the practice of the Greek stage."<sup>6</sup> They are the "scenic" unities, "continuities," as Prof. Moulton calls them, demanded by the exigencies of the Greek theatre. A Greek tragedy began where ours is ready to end,—that is, at the moment of suspense preceding the climax. From this point the catastrophe was rapidly sketched and the action concluded with a swift *dénouement*.<sup>7</sup> Thus there was little opportunity for elaboration, for counter-action, or for sub-plot, so that the unity of action was a tangible, distinctive feature of the drama, and not, as with our romantic playwrights, a vague, indeterminate generalization. The minor unities were conserved with equal decisiveness by the Chorus of the Greek tragedy. How the Chorus tended to have this effect requires no explanation.<sup>8</sup> It must not be forgotten,

<sup>3</sup> Full discussions on this point are found in Butcher's *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (3rd Ed. 1902, pp. 274 ff.); also in Moulton's *The Ancient Classical Drama* (1890, pp. 124 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Butcher (op. cit., p. 275).

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Lounsbury (*Shakespearean Wars*, Vol. 1, Chap. I *passim*) seems to find for the doctrine a greater currency than it had. In its Aristotelian sense it is certainly far from universal in the practice of the English playwrights. Vd. *infra*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Butcher, as above, p. 277.

<sup>7</sup> Butcher (*idem*) calls this "The simple and highly concentrated movement of the Greek tragedy."

<sup>8</sup> It is to be noted that the stage was never empty. Cf. the French *liaison des scènes*, the irresistible result of strict adherence to time and place.

however, as many scholars have pointed out, that in the Greek drama "the time that elapses during the songs of the Chorus is entirely idealized"; and also that the unities of time and place (for the latter was equally a stage practice with the Greeks<sup>9</sup>) are by no means universally observed. It is necessary to remember, furthermore, that in the Greek observance of the unities there is little, if any, thought of "verisimilitude," of restricting the time and place for the purpose of producing the semblance of reality. Certainly the Greeks did not found these stage practices, as the Renaissance critics did, on any false and shackling notion of *vraisemblance*. We must look upon them as determined by the conditions of the Greek theatre;<sup>10</sup> yet, may we add that they are the concomitants of an inner, subtler necessity—of the law for unity of effect in all things, in a Gothic cathedral as well as in a Greek temple? Unity underlies all works of art and is an expression of an instinctive desire in man. If, then, the unities of time and place help, in a modest way, to fulfill this desire, may we not be justified in considering them with greater tolerance as, in a measure, connected with the basic principle of Unity? But more of this later.

Before coming to the Renaissance theory and practice it is necessary to bridge, in a few words, the gap between the Greeks and the Italians. That the Roman dramas are slavish imitations of the Greek is evident enough, but that they knew the *Poetics* may well be doubted.<sup>11</sup> Horace has an allusion to the unity of action:

<sup>9</sup> The reason for Aristotle's silence on the unity of place is thus commented upon by D'Aubignac (*Pratique* 1, 86): "J'estime qu'il l'a négligé (i. e., l'unité de lieu) a cause que cette unité étoit trop connue de son temps; et que les Choeurs qui demeuroient ordinairement sur le Théâtre durant tout le cours d'une Pièce, marquoient trop visiblement l'Unité de Lieu."

<sup>10</sup> Raumer (*Ueber die Poet. des Arist.*, 1828, p. 183) holds that the place of a Greek tragedy, as the time, was idealized. "Kann man aber von einer solchen Einheit sprechen wo der Ort so ganz bestimmungslos, so negativ genommen wird, dass er eigentlich gar nicht mitspielt, sondern nur den Raum bezeichnet, hinreichend, dass Leute dasselbst gehn, stehn und reden können?"

<sup>11</sup> "Ob Seneca oder die Römer die Poetik des Aristotles gekannt haben, ist mehr als zweifelhaft." (Ebner, *Beitrag z. Gesch. der Einheiten in Italien*, p. 20.)

"Denique sit quidvis, simplex dumtaxat et unum." (v. 23.)

Seneca adheres closely to the minor unities. On the other hand, the careful division of his dramas into acts made it possible for a new influence to come in later. In the Senecan plays the Chorus leaves the stage at the end of each act; thus a decided break in the *continuity* of the action is produced, and a change of scene is easily possible.<sup>12</sup>

The next mention of the *Poetics* is in Averroës' so-called translation.<sup>13</sup> This work, which is really a paraphrase<sup>14</sup> appearing first in 1481, drew attention to the original, and in 1498 came the earliest Latin translation, by Georgius Valla. Aristotle was now to take his place as a giver of dramatic laws, as he had already established his reputation as a scientist and a philosopher. Renaissance scholars eagerly turned to his work for the rules that were to determine the form of the dramatic output in Italy for a great number of years, and in France for many more. The Renaissance had its first home in Italy; hence the dramatic unities arose in this land. As Ebner expresses it, "Gerade dieses Land (Italian) also Ausgangspunkt diesen Regeln unsere besondere Aufmerksamkeit in Anspruch nehmen muss."<sup>15</sup>

The eager interest during the rebirth of learning in all documents of the past, the veneration for the name of Aristotle,

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cunliffe (*The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*) 1893, p. 37: "The absence of the Chorus during the progress of the action lessened Seneca's hold on the so-called unities of time and place."

<sup>13</sup> Averroës (Ibn-Roschd, 1126-1198). As Renan says (*Averroës et l'Averroïsme*) "Ibn-Roschd n'a lu Aristote que dans les anciennes versions faites du syriaque par Honein Ibn Ihak." Cited Ebner, o. c. p. 24. By this work in the *Munch. Beiträge*, I have benefited largely, in my summary of the unities in Greece and sixteenth-century Italy. Nor must I fail to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Spingarn's book and to his personal help, cheerfully given, in the matter of bibliography.

<sup>14</sup> Averroës did not expound his version as a code of laws for the writers of his land, but drew from it what they could appreciate. As Ebner puts it, "Wären die italienischen Übersetzer, Kommentatoren und Dichter eben so unbefangen der Poetik des Aristoteles gegenüber getreten, so würden die Regeln von der Einheiten nicht Jahrhunderte lang den freien Geistesschwung des Genies eingedämmt haben." Cf. with this, Saintsbury, *Hist. Criticism*, V. 2, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> Ebner (o. c. p. 3) Cf. Morandi, *Voltaire contro Shakespeare*, etc., p. 169, ff.

accounts for the large number of Latin and Italian translations and adaptations of the *Poetics* that appeared in the 16th century in Italy. But the equally large number of commentaries on the text is accounted for by the very incompleteness of that text. Its *précis* form, its summary treatment, required expansion, elaboration, and was a veritable boon for gentlemen exegetically inclined. Gaspari expresses this well,—“Die vielfach dunkelen und schwierigen Sätze der Poetik, boten immer die Möglichkeit, dass jeder darin fand was er brauchte, und um ihre Auslegung hat sich Jahrhunderte lang die literarische Kritik mehr gedreht, als um direkte Betrachtung der Kunst und des Kunstwerkes.”<sup>16</sup>

We shall briefly review the progress of Italian thought on the subject of the unities, with the ultimate aim of noting the trend of the criticism and its influence on English ideas. Ebner has found the earliest “modern” reference to dramatic laws in *Historia Betica*, a Latin play by Caroli Verardi of Cesena, acted in Rome in 1492. The author in his preface reveals a knowledge of rules for the theatre, but like his fellow-dramatist Ricci, and so many others, he does not choose to follow the laws.<sup>17</sup> The position of the first to refer at some length to the unity of time has been claimed for Giraldi Cintio;<sup>18</sup> yet if Trissino’s work, published posthumously, was written and known in 1529 (as there is good ground for believing), the credit must be given to the latter critic. In substance Trissino<sup>19</sup> repeats Aristotle,—the action is to be *una e compiuta e grande*; the time he limits “to one period of the sun or little more.” For the vague expres-

<sup>16</sup> Gaspari, *Gesch. der ital. Lit.*, V. 2, p. 562. Cited also by Ebner.

<sup>17</sup> Ebner (p. 162) gives the passage referred to in the text. It does not seem to have exercised any influence on later thought, its great interest lying in its early date, at the very threshold of the modern era. On Ricci Vd. *infra*.

<sup>18</sup> Spingarn (*Hist. Lit. Crit. in Ren.* 1908, p. 91) and others after him. Giraldi’s book dates 1554. The exact date of the completion of his work is April 20, 1543. Trissino (1478-1550) published the first four parts of his *Sei Divisione*, etc., in 1529. The two parts dealing with Tragedy and Comedy did not appear till 1563. Several circumstances (discussed by Ebner) make it likely that the later parts were ready simultaneously with the earlier.

<sup>19</sup> For work, etc., see Bibliography,—as for the other Italians cited.

sion—"one period of the sun"—this commentator offers no explanation, as he might have done if he had known the edition and commentaries of Robortelli (1548).<sup>20</sup>

Of greater importance is the fact that Trissino is perhaps the first to say specifically that the unity of time is a hard and fast rule of tragedy, and that "only ignorant poets" disregard it. This is a sweeping statement indeed, and by no means true. It marks, however, as Professor Spingarn points out, "the first distinction between the learned and ignorant poet, based on the test of the observance of the unity of time," which is "an artistic principle with Trissino that has helped to save dramatic poetry from the formlessness and chaotic condition of the Mediaeval drama."<sup>21</sup>

That Trissino's statement regarding "ignorant" poets is illiberal and untrue, is proved by the words of Ricci, a dramatist and contemporary of the critic. In the prologue to his *Tre Tiranni* (1553)<sup>22</sup> Ricci makes a surprisingly modern attack on the "theatric" laws. He sums up the case against the strict constructionists with spirit and intelligence, and from one point of view leaves little to be added. "It has pleased the author," he says, "to depart somewhat from the customs and rules of the ancients, who represent in their comedies but one action, accomplished in a brief time or in a single day. The author has wished that the present play should, according as the action demands, include many days and nights, even a whole year. And while he can frankly say that such was his pleasure, he has, none the less, several reasons to advance in support of his position: as we are now living in the present and not in times long past, and as the demands are different, it seems evident that with these changes should also be altered and renewed according to the time, poetry, and prose, and verse, and style, as well as the art of representation." Here is a sweeping rejection of the dramatic unities. And as Castelvetro first summed up

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ebner, p. 59, who points this out.

<sup>21</sup> Spingarn (o. c. p. 93).

<sup>22</sup> Cited Ebner, p. 163. I have not read the work, which Ebner calls a comedy.

completely the case for the unities, so Ricci is the first, as far as is known, to deny them as completely.<sup>23</sup>

Giraldi Cintio was a dramatist as well as a critic and knew the difficulty of strict adherence to the unities. He at first defends his slight trespassing of the single day unity<sup>24</sup> and cites Greek and Latin precedent. Going back to the phrase of Aristotle, he declares himself willing to expand the words,—“a little more”—into two days.<sup>25</sup> Later Giraldi seems to have repented his latitude, and he becomes a conformist in practice as well as in theory. In the dramatist's examination of his play *Heracleis*<sup>26</sup> occurs a statement that may be construed as the first mention of the unity of place. Giraldi shows that the time must be lengthened because of “la lontananza dei luoghi”—an argument we will meet again. Evidently he regards the unity of place not as a law, but as a mere help to the representation, not at all necessary for verisimilitude<sup>27</sup>—though the “distance between places” leads directly to the doctrine of the verisimilar.

To Robertelli belongs the doubtful honor of first giving to the drama an exact time limit, that of the artificial day of twelve hours. In favor of this view he makes the plea that “No work is done at night.”<sup>28</sup> His opinion is stoutly opposed by another critic, Bernardo Segni, who says that some deeds, such as plottings and murders, naturally belong to the night. The

<sup>23</sup> Of course it must be remembered that when Ricci wrote, the unities had not yet been made gospel by hundreds of critics and by the consenting bondage of as many dramatists. They were still being weighed in the balance, even in Italy. Cf. Ebner, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> In his *Discorsi*, p. 250 ff., Cf. p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Spingarn (p. 91), who says, “One day or but little more.” Giraldi's words are, “Le (dramatic poetry) diede piu spatio di uno giorno: & noi con la sua autorità componemmo l'Antile et la Didone di modo, che la lor attione tocca alquanto di due giorni.”

<sup>26</sup> See the passage in Ebner.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Giraldi's discussion of “verisimilitude” in the “Epilogo” to his *Didone* (1543). He was incited to this by the criticism of Bartolomeo Cavalcanti on his play. His remarks (given by Ebner, p. 165) should be compared with those of Corneille in his *Discours*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. D'Aubignac—*Pratique*, p. 109. Robertelli's Latin edition and commentary is dated 1548. Segni's is the first Italian translation.



unity of place is further commented upon by Maggi, who, by deriving the unities strictly from the necessity of preserving *verisimilitude*, gives the basis of future discussion.<sup>29</sup>

It is unprofitable for our purpose to examine into the theories of a number of other Italian commentators. There is no view worthy of attention until we come to Scaliger. This writer makes "no direct statement on the unity of time,—but his reference is unmistakable."<sup>30</sup> His indefinite limit is from six to eight hours. Nor does he allow anything on the stage that is not in strict accordance with *verisimile*. When dealing with the story of Ceyx, says this pedant, do not begin your play with the departure of the ship, as no storm of sufficient fury to sink the vessel can arise within the time allotted. Nor is it within reason to expect that a shipwreck can prove fatal when the vessel is hardly out of sight of land.<sup>31</sup> Such is the narrow, spiritless view of our dryasdust scholar. Let us have perfect adherence to truth, to actuality in all details, is the burden of his cry. No lies, no deceptions. The deadening effect of such criticism is evident enough. Unfortunately, the influence of Scaliger's ideas, shackling though they were, was widespread. As Ebner sums it up, "Die allgemeine Hochachtung, die ihm (Scaliger) also Gelehrten gezollt wurde, hat auch seiner Poetik zu dem Ansehen verholfen das sie nahezu zwei Jahrhunderte lang in Italien, Spanien, Frankreich und Deutschland genossen hat."

There remains for consideration the work of but one Italian critic, whose views, of prime importance in the formulation of the minor unities, exercised a vast influence on English thought.

<sup>29</sup> Maggi in his *Annotationes* (1550) is also the first to hint at a limitation of time for the epic. Minturno (1559 and 1563) narrows the time down to one year.

<sup>30</sup> Spingarn (op. cit. p. 94).

<sup>31</sup> Professor Spingarn in his citations (p. 96) from Scaliger is somewhat misleading. This is because of failure to mention that the Italian critic points to Ovid's story of Ceyx as his example. What Saintsbury (*Hist. Crit.*, V. 2, p. 76) says on Scaliger is well worth repeating: "Scaliger did not explicitly enjoin the Three Unities, but he did more than any other man has done to inculcate that unfortunate notion of 'verisimilitude' from which, much more than from Aristotle, they were derived."

This critic is Castelvetro.<sup>32</sup> His reasoning, as Professor Spingarn has pointed out, is based entirely on stage representation. It is the old notion of verisimilitude worked to such absurd extremes as to be fairly ludicrous. As bases for his deductions he propounds questions like the following: How long can the spectator sit out a performance without physical weariness? How many things can be presented him without making the mental strain too intense? Such views can but arouse wonder and despair. Foolish and illogical in the extreme, they barred the theatre to imagination and gave but grudging admittance to sympathy. It is to the perverted ideas of Castelvetro, as determined by his predecessors, that the unities of time and place owe the greatest share of their ill-repute.<sup>33</sup>

Having traced the course of Italian theory to the final formulation of the unities, we can now sum up the trend of the criticism. We shall thus be prepared to note the influence of this body of critical ideas upon English speculation on the subject.

It has been seen that the unities—all three—originated with the Greeks as stage practice, due to stage necessities. They were certainly not reasoned out by Aristotle on self-concocted premises. With the Italians the case is reversed. Ostensibly fathered on Aristotle,<sup>34</sup> they were really the result of *a priori*

<sup>32</sup> Spingarn (o. c. p. 97): "Castelvetro (1570) was the first theorist to formulate the unity of place, and thus to give the three unities their final form." Ebner doubts (p. 41) whether Otto, in his Preface to *Saül*, was right in naming Castelvetro as "der Formulierer der Ortseinheit." In fact, he names Jean de la Taille (1572) for this much-disputed position. The reasons he advances are by no means convincing or sufficient, and surely the amount of space given by the Italian critic to the discussion of the unities assures him undisputed possession of the honor. Ebner evidently has not noted the passage cited by Professor Spingarn (p. 99).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Professor Saintsbury (op. cit. p. 84): "And so the Three, the Weird Sisters of dramatic criticism, the vampires that sucked the blood out of nearly all European tragedy, save in England and Spain, for three centuries, make their appearance from the time of Castelvetro."

<sup>34</sup> Manzoni (*Lettre à M. C. sur l'unité de temps, etc.*) well expresses the imagined embarrassment of the Philosopher at the honor thrust upon him: "Si ce philosophe revenait et qu'on lui présentât nos axiomes dramatiques comme issus de lui, ne leur ferait-il pas le même accueil que fait M. de Pourceaugnac à ces jeunes Languedociens . . . dont on veut à toute force qu'il se déclare le père?"

notions, taken from a hint of the ancients and defended and practiced with no consideration for the conditions of the contemporaneous stage. The Renaissance critic failed to give the same regard to the exigencies of the Italian stage that the Greek gave to his own, and thus the true lesson of Aristotle's example was lost upon them. What is more, the sixteenth century theorists, having established their preconceived ideas, turned round to censure the errors of the very ancients upon whom they professed to found these ideas. This is a method familiar to the neo-classic mind. The *a priori* notion which really gave rise to the Italian unities is that of "verisimilitude."<sup>35</sup> This idea of producing plays that must be faultless in their approximation to reality, of writing so that the result will be veridical to the uttermost, is present in all Italian speculation on the unities, from its earliest mention in this connection by Bartolomeo Cavalcanti (before 1543)<sup>36</sup> to the very end of the critical period. As a matter of dogma, "verisimilitude" seems to spring directly from the Renaissance perversion of the Aristotelian notion of "imitation." Misleading as much of Italian reasoning on the doctrine of "imitation" is, its application to the drama is beyond a doubt one of the saddest instances of neo-classic misjudgment. In its tendency the principle of verisimilitude is narrowing and shackling in the extreme. Its reaction upon the dramatist and the spectator is most disastrous. It permits the former no free swing of fancy; while it represses and atrophies the imagination of the latter. This is perhaps its most baneful influence upon Italian and French dramatic writings. Such is the tendency that struggled in vain for firm foothold upon English soil. Such is the theory that Corneille had to avow with half-hearted allegiance and to defend with quibble and sophistry. Unfortunately there arose no clear thinker to point out that it was not the basic idea of "unity"—whether of action, or of time, or of place,—that called for defense; that what the three really needed was liberal interpretation and plain understanding. And thus the much-maligned doctrine of unity—wrongly derived from an eminently false notion—was to suffer

<sup>35</sup> The points of contact of this idea with "imitation," and "decorum," and perhaps "realism," might well repay working out.

<sup>36</sup> I am not certain as to this claim of priority.

the brunt of the attack that should have been aimed at the underlying misconception. In other words, I do not think it too much to say that the minor unities as interpreted through the medium of the verisimilar, are really a perversion of the unities as understood by Aristotle and the Greek dramatists. That the Greeks regarded them with the latitude of some of our dyed-in-the-wool "romanticists," can admit, I think, of no doubt.

The unity of action, however, fared differently at the hands of the Italians. Whereas they succeeded in so distorting the minor unities as to render them beyond recognition, they treated the major unity with wholly disproportionate neglect. Castelvetro sums up this second tendency—no less baneful than the first—by distinctly subordinating the typical Greek unity. Thus the Italian neo-classicists, while making a pretense of reverence for the so-called rules of Aristotle, begin by diverting them from their true significance, and finish by reversing their true and natural order. Here, undoubtedly, the exegesis is at fault,—and not the fundamental idea which the three unities hold in common.

With this necessarily brief summary of the earlier evolution of the unities, we are ready to investigate their progress as a theory of dramatic art in England.<sup>37</sup> As has been already suggested, the discussion of the question by English dramatists and critics is taken up at the point where the Italians leave off,—so that the effect of the neo-classic tradition is evident. It will be necessary, therefore, to keep constantly in mind the viewpoint of Italian reasoning, and note the extent and the cause of English departure from it.

Our subject divides itself into two parts: the first from the beginnings to 1650 approximately; the second from 1650 to the end of the seventeenth century. The latter date, it must be said, is chosen mainly for convenience and limitation.

In the first period, English speculation on the unities is, with the exception of the work of Ben Jonson, merely tentative and largely casual. There is no considerable body of criticism

<sup>37</sup> The only survey of the dramatic unities in England is that contained in the first three chapters of Professor Lounsbury's *Shakespearean Wars*, Vol. I. already mentioned.

on the subject coming from this era of literary creation. One must make one's gleanings from a mass of uncorrelated material, finding an allusion here, a reference there,—and at the end the material is all too scanty. Yet the trends revealed by this small volume of criticism are unmistakable. On the one hand, there is a tendency, not too pronounced or dogmatic, toward rigid interpretation of the rules; on the other, a triumphant disregard of the principle of unity and a complete severing from it. The first is essentially neo-classic in spirit; the second is English,—an assertion of native independence.

In the sixteenth century the classic tradition in England was by no means dead or moribund.<sup>38</sup> An instance of this is the desire to preserve "*decorum*" expressed by various dramatists,—a desire that Jonson was to repeat with characteristic emphasis. An early example is the words of Richard Edwards in the Prologue to *Damon and Pythias* (1565):

"If this offend the lookers-on, let Horace then be blamed,  
Which hath our author taught at school, from whom he doth not swerve,  
In all such kind of exercise *decorum* to observe." <sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Professor Lounsbury (op. cit.) is inclined to underrate the strength of the classic influence at this period. He says, for instance, that Lyly was unacquainted with the doctrine of the unities. The studies of R. Warwick Bond have made it possible to deny this. (Vd. his Ed. of Lyly's plays, 1902, Vol. 2, p. 267, seq.) Mr. Bond says: "All of Lyly's plays require the lapse of a considerable time, with the exception of 'Mother Bombie' and 'The Woman.' . . . Of place he is much more careful. In no play are we transported far from the spot at which it opened, save in 'Midas' and in 'Endimion.' Furthermore, Lyly endeavors fitfully to observe that continuity of scenes which is a corollary from the strict observance of Time and Place." And again (p. 270), "To sum up, Lyly in the matter of Time and Place balances between classical precedent and romantic freedom, obviously aware of the rules and sometimes closely observing them, at others pretending to observe while he really violates, at others frankly disregarding them and claiming licenses which the later romantics abandoned." Surely these views of Lyly's are important when we consider his great influence upon Shakespeare's formative period.

<sup>39</sup> In Hazlitt's *Dodsley* (1874), Vol. 4. Similar references to "*decorum*" are found in Nathaniel Woodes' *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581) (*Dodsley*, Vol. 6, p. 34), in Robt. Wilmot's *Tancred and Gis-munda*, prefatory Address, 1591, and in Florio's *Dialogues*. (Vd. below, p. 19.)

Another, and a more important passage, which is practically a plea for decorum rather than for the unities, is that contained in Whetstone's Dedication to *Promos and Cassandra* (1578):

"The *Englishman* in this qualitie (i. e., truth to Nature) is most vaine, indiscreete and out of order: he fyrst groundes his worke on impossibilities; then in three howers ronnes he throwe the worlde, marryes, gets Children, makes Children men, men to conquer Kingdoms, murder Monsters, and bringeth Gods from Heauen, and fetcheth Diuels from Hel." <sup>40</sup>

These words merit some attention as the first English statement of an idea that enjoyed surprisingly widespread currency,<sup>41</sup> and which Sidney thought fit to make the central point of his attack on the romantic playwrights. There is no play extant, as several scholars have pointed out, from which Whetstone could have drawn the ground for his charge. Professor Lounsbury describes it well as "a piece of rhetorical exaggeration to emphasize an opinion rather than a calm statement of fact."<sup>42</sup> It might with equal truth be urged that because of the wild extravagance of melodrama, all physical action on the legitimate boards should be unduly restricted. In pointing out the extreme of disregard of the rules, Whetstone must not be assumed as pleading for a conformity equally extreme. Moreover, this view gathers weight when it is remembered that the critic is no stickler, in his own practice, for adherence to the rules. As a matter of fact, he fails to observe them in any rigid acceptance in his *Promos and Cassandra*. We can hardly look upon him, then, as influenced to any appreciable extent by the Italian tradition.

The doctrine of the three unities enters English criticism with Sidney.<sup>43</sup> His contribution to the discussion is far and

<sup>40</sup> Given by Gregory G. Smith, *Eliza. Critical Essays*, Vol. 1.

<sup>41</sup> It is frequently reiterated in England, among others, by Sidney, Jonson, Fielding (*Tom Jones*, Ch. V) and by Gildon (see below, note, page 18); in Spain by Cervantes and Lope de Vega; in France by D'Aubignac, Boileau and Voltaire; and in Italy by Ingegneri (1598).

<sup>42</sup> Idem, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Spingarn, and others. Sidney's work was published 1595 and written c. 1583.

away the most important that antedates Jonson's, and comes, of course, in his *Apologie for Poetry*:

"Our Tragedies and Comedies (not without cause cried out against) observing rules neyther of honest ciuilitie nor of skilfull Poetrie, excepting *Gorboduck* . . . (yet) it is faulty both in place and time; the necessary companions of all corporall actions. For where the stage should alwaies represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by *Aristoteles* precept and common reason, but one day, there is both many dayes and many places, inartificially imagined. But if it be so in *Gorboduck*, how much more in all the rest? where you shall haue *Asia* of the one side, and *Affrick* of the other, and so many other under-kingdoms, that the Player, when he commeth in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or els the tale wil not be conceiued. Now ye shal haue three Ladies walke to gather flowers, and then we must belieue the stage to be a Garden. By and by we heare newes of shipwracke in the same place, and then wee are to blame if we accept it not for a Rock. Vpon the back of that, comes out a hidious Monster, with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bounde to take it for a Caue. While in the meantime two Armies flye in, represented with foure swords and bucklers, and then what harde heart will not receiue it for a pitched fielde? Now, of time they are much more liberall, for ordinary it is that two young Princes fall in loue. After many trauerces, she is got with childe, deliuered of a faire boy; he is lost, groweth a man, falls in loue, and is ready to get another childe; and all this in two hours' space: which how absurd it is in sence euen sence may imagine, and Arte hath taught, and all ancient examples iustified, and, at this day, the ordinary Players in Italie wil not erre in." <sup>44</sup>

Sidney is evidently making a plea for greater polish in English dramatic performances. As a man of education and refinement his taste was displeased by the rudeness of the Elizabethan stage. Here we have a further indication of the fact that in

<sup>44</sup> Quoted from Smith's ed. (as above), v. 1, p. 196 ff. The critic enforces his plea for the unity of one day by instancing the practice of Plautus and Terence. "Let us hit with him [Plautus] and not miss with him," says Sidney.

England the "theatre" was for the populace and not for the privileged and cultured few.

It is well to note that the critic looks upon the minor unities as derived from "Aristoteles, and common reason," backed by the practice of the ancients and contemporary Italian "Players." It has been pointed out by several writers<sup>45</sup> that Sidney owes much in the general tone of his criticism and in his conclusions to Castelvetro, so that in respect to the unities he accepts the neo-classic view.<sup>46</sup> His is the first English statement of the doctrine—"one place and one day"; yet it is hard to imagine that Sidney was in sympathy with the Italian hair-splitting on the subject; his mind was certainly not of that construction. He is, however, undeniably in accord with the minor unities as a principle.

In at least one other respect is Sidney's statement of importance. His exposition of the scenic bareness of the English stage touches upon a vital point in the discussion. I refer to the question of "imagination." Our critic is unintentionally amusing in his use of the expression "many places *inartificially* imagined";—the fact is that the Elizabethan dramatist and the Elizabethan play-goer did imagine "*inartificially*," and I have already suggested that the Italian critics refused to permit "*inartificial*" imagination, or any sort of imagination. This, as I shall attempt to show, is the crux of the question, as regards the Elizabethan dramatist. The latter's appeal is everlastingly to the imagination. He invokes it for his wonder-working; it is for him the staff of Prospero, and the listeners must be Ariels, obedient to his wizardry and themselves dowered with the gracious gift of fancy. On it rests his unity and his effect.—It is this influence that Sidney was unwittingly decrying.

We have already noted the similarity of the strictures that both Sidney and Whetstone lay on the dramatist who trans-

<sup>45</sup> E. g., Spingarn, and Breitingen, *Rev. Critique*, v. 13, n. s. Vols. 7 & 8.

<sup>46</sup> Sidney's indebtedness to neo-classicism is summed up in his advocacy of the three rules. Cf. Hamelius (*Die Kritik*, etc., p. 14), "Nur eine einzige Regel der Neoklassiker nahm Sir Ph. Sidney an: er empfahl für das Drama die drei Einheiten des Ortes, der Zeit, und der Handlung."



gresses the unity of time.<sup>47</sup> The character of the passage must not be taken as a warranty, as in the case of Whetstone, that the later critic is not a thorough-going classicist in this matter. It must be remembered that Sidney began the latter part of his critique with a thesis in mind,—“that poetry is now despised in England,” and that the practice of the ancients must be revived. This fact is evident in his reference to the unity of action. True to his thesis he points out that Euripides does not begin his play “aboov,” hence English dramatists should likewise refrain from beginning too far back in their story. Sidney’s statement, it is well worth noting, is limited in application to the writers who “will represent history.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, he takes up the point at the tail-end of his discussion, and in the briefest possible manner. We see in this a subordination of the unity of action—certainly the result of Italian influence.

The next mention of the unities is but an indirect reference. It occurs in Florio’s *Dialogue in Italian and English*,<sup>49</sup> and is, in effect, a plea for decorum:

G. After dinner we will go see a play.

H. The plaies that they play in England are not right comedies.

T. Yet they do nothing else but plaie every daye.

H. Yea, but they are neither right comedies, nor right tragedies.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Chas. Gildon (*Laws of Poetry*, etc., 1721, p. 174): “Like Webster in his *Duchess of Malfi*, bring in a child just born in the beginning of the play, and before the end of it show him a man not only full-grown, but also in years, than which I think there can be nothing more absurd.” The similar absurdity of complete disregard of the unity of place is shown in a like strain by Angelo Ingegneri (*Discorso della Poesia Rappresentativa*, 1598). He takes a play having for its scenes some five or six places in different parts of the world. As the act ends every time there is a change of scene, says our critic, the play therefore has fifteen or twenty acts!

<sup>48</sup> Thus Sidney thinks that “histories” were most subject to the neglect of the unity of action, as he understood that unity. The critic links it certainly with Greek stage practice. Cf. the passage, “Lastly if they will represent a history, they must not, as Horace saith, begin ‘ab ovo,’ but they must come to the principal point of that one action which they will represent” (p. 49 Cook’s ed.). This connects with Professor Schelling’s “epic-unity” of the chronicle-play. See his *The English Chronicle Play*, 1902.

<sup>49</sup> Cited Malone: *Variorum Ed. of Sh.’s Plays*, 1821, Vol. 3, p. 41, note. The date of the dialogue is 1591.

G. How would you name them, then?

H. Representations of *histories*, without any decorum.

A far richer passage, though not a direct discussion of the subject, is found in Dekker's *Old Fortunatus* (pr. 1600). Its importance lies in the stress it places on the imaginative powers demanded of the spectators. In spirit, the lines cited below are singularly like those in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Both dramatists express the same reliance on the "winged thought" of the spectator, and both evince a tacit but deep-seated antagonism to the rules as commonly accepted. This is truly Elizabethan and native,—its spirit is legitimately descended from the mysteries and miracle plays of the Middle Ages. The first *locus* is in the Prologue to Dekker's play:

"And for this small Circumference must stand  
For the imagind Sur-face of much land  
Of many Kingdomes, and since many a mile  
Should here be measured out: our muse intreats  
Your thoughts to help poore Art, and to allow  
That I may serue as Chorus to her scenes;  
She begs your pardon, for sheele send me foorth,  
Not where the lawes of Poetry doe call  
But as the storie needes; your gracious eye  
Giues life to Fortunatus historie." <sup>50</sup>

Again, before the second "scene," the Chorus says:

"The world to the circumference of heauen,  
Is as a small point in Geometrie,  
Whose greatness is so little, that a lesse  
Cannot be made: into that narrow roome,  
Your quicke imaginations we must charme,  
To turn that world: and (turn'd) again to part it  
Into large kingdomes, and within one moment  
To carry Fortunatus on the wings  
Of actiue thought, many a thousand miles."<sup>51</sup>

In a similar strain the Chorus speaks at his next appearance:

"If your swift thoughts clap on their wonted wings,  
In Genoway may you take this fugitiue,  
Where hauing cozened many Jewellers,

<sup>50</sup>Thos. Dekker, *The Comedy of Old Fortunatus*, p. 54 (in *Münch. Beiträge*, etc., 1901, No. 21).

<sup>51</sup>Idem, p. 76.

To England backe he comes;  
He clasps her [Agripyne] in his armes, and as a Rauē,  
Gripping the tender-hearted Nightingale,  
So flies he with her, wishing in the ayre  
To be transported to some wilderness.  
Imagine this the place: see, here they come.''<sup>52</sup>

We are now ready to examine the views of Shakespeare, whose attitude, as already hinted, is distinctly English and Elizabethan. He nowhere expresses in so many words an acquaintance with the unities. Professor Lounsbury has argued at some length to prove that the poet was not in ignorance of the doctrine,—certainly, it would appear, a view that can admit of little doubt.

The passage of special interest for our purpose is the lines already referred to, in *Henry V*:

“But pardon, gentles all,  
The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
Attest in little place a million;  
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
On your imaginary forces work.  
Suppose within the girdle of these walls  
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,  
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts  
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:  
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
And make imaginary puissance;  
Think, when we talk of horses that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i’ the receiving earth,  
For ’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,  
Carry them here and there; jumping o’er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,  
Admit me Chorus to this history.’’<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Idem, p. 112.

<sup>53</sup> Prologue, ll. 8 ff.

And again, the Prologue to Act II:

"Linger your patience on, and we'll digest  
The abuse of distance, . . .  
The King is set from London; and the scene  
Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton;  
There is the playhouse now, there must you sit:  
And thence to France shall we convey you safe,  
And bring you back, charming the narrow seas  
To give you gentle pass." <sup>54</sup>

The essential inadequacy of his stage for the representation of the "hugeness" of things is thus expressed by the dramatist:

"Of such as have [read the story]  
I humbly pray them to admit the excuse  
Of time, of numbers, and due course of things,  
Which cannot in their huge and proper life  
Be here presented." <sup>55</sup>

It is in a precious passage such as this that the great dramatist, in a momentary indulgence of self-revelation, opens for us the guarded portals of his artistic consciousness. While, indeed, one gets no direct expression of Shakespeare's knowledge of the unities, the implication is thoroughly convincing. Nor need we harbor doubts as to the master's attitude. Addressing himself to the sophisticated and critical part of his audience, he begins with what is surely an interrogation of verisimilitude; and he goes on to reiterate, with insistence, Dekker's abiding faith in the quickening imaginations of his spectators. One may find here, too, Shakespeare's pronouncement on the essential irreconcilability between the vaguer unity of the historical or chronicle play, and the definite, classic unity that he must have known.

In addition to the passages already given, one or two others may be quoted from Shakespeare in connection with the dramatic unities.<sup>56</sup> In the *Winter's Tale* the playwright expresses his

<sup>54</sup> Prologue, Act II, ll. 31 ff.

<sup>55</sup> Prol., Act V; ll. 2 ff.

<sup>56</sup> Professor Lounsbury (o. c.) believes that "scene individable, or poem unlimited," refers to the unities. Vd. *Hamlet*, II, 2, 418. With this should perhaps be connected the lines in the *Spanish Tragedy* (IV, 1, 158):

consciousness of the fact that the story must jump an interval of sixteen years:

“Impute it not a crime  
To me or my swift passage, that I slide  
O’er sixteen years and leave the growth untried  
Of that wide gap.”<sup>57</sup>

And again, in *Cymbeline*:

“The swiftest harts have posted you by land;  
The winds of all the corners kiss’d your sails,  
To make your vessel nimble.”<sup>58</sup>

It may be added that allusions, similar to the last, to the quick flight of time are of frequent occurrence in the plays. This leads one to the conclusion that Shakespeare was at least conscious of the necessity to preserve a certain propriety, though not a verisimilitude of time. A play like *The Tempest* places this beyond peradventure.

Another independent is Marston. In the *Argumentum* to his *Dutch Courtezan*<sup>59</sup> he frankly confesses to having included a sub-plot. He further identifies himself with the romanticists by his statement in *What You Will* (1607):<sup>60</sup>

“Know rules of art  
Were shaped to pleasure, not pleasure to your rules.”

Marston implies here, it seems, that “rules of art” were being urged,—and indeed they were, forcibly and vociferously, for the urging was done by no other than “rare Ben Jonson,”—“Master Ben.” Jonson argued for the rules so often and at such

HIERONIMO: The Italian tragedians were so sharpe  
Of wit that in one houres meditation  
They would performe any-thing in action.  
LORENZO: And well it may, for I haue seene the like  
In Paris, mongst the French tragedians.

On the relations between *Hamlet* and the *Spanish Tragedy*, consult the article by Professor A. H. Thorndike in *Pub. Mod. Lang. Ass’n*, Vol. 17.

<sup>57</sup> Chorus to Act IV; ll. 4 ff.

<sup>58</sup> II, 4, 27.

<sup>59</sup> Printed 1605. Vd. Works of John Marston (Ed. Bullen, 1887).

<sup>60</sup> Induction to the play. *Idem*, v. 2, p. 323.

length, that the sum of his criticism on the question is the most considerable prior to Dryden. He discussed the issues within plays, and before and after plays, and in miscellaneous notes or *Timber*, and in conversation, we may believe, with Drummond, as well as, probably, with many another good listener. It was natural for such diligence to be rewarded and Jonson became the recognized champion of the "rules." The dramatist was not backward in asserting his position. In the preface prefixed to Brome's *Northern Lass* (1632), Jonson, addressing the younger playwright, says:

"the good applause,  
Which you have justly gained from the Stage,  
By observation of those Comick Laws  
Which I, your Master, first did teach this age."<sup>61</sup>

The authority of Jonson was acknowledged by a large number of his contemporaries in a volume of praise, *Jonsonus Virbius*, issued in 1638. In this work the Master is described by John Cleveland as

"The voice most echo'd by consenting men."<sup>62</sup>

And again, by Schackerley Marmion, as

"Knowing to move, to slack, or to make haste,  
Binding the middle with the first and last:  
He framed all minds, and did all passions stir,  
And with a bridle guide the theatre."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Brome (Richard) *Dramatic Works*, London 1873, Vol. 3. A reminder of "The War of the Theatres" (Vd. Penniman, *Penn. Studies in Phil.*, etc., v. 4, No. 3, 1897) comes in the lines that Richard West contributed to *Jonsonus Virbius*:

"Histrio-Mastix (lightning-like) doth wound  
Those things alone that solid are and sound."

(Jonson's Wks., ed. Cunningham, IX, 472.)

Another contributor, R. Brideoake, is moved in his enthusiasm for Jonson, to heap violent epithets upon the devoted head of Brome:

"Though the fine plush and velvets of the age  
Did oft for sixpence damn thee from the stage,  
And with their mast and acorn stomachs ran  
To the nasty sweepings of thy serving man."

(idem, p. 470.)

<sup>62</sup> idem, p. 449.

<sup>63</sup> idem, p. 466.

Jonson's authority in exploiting the dramatic unities is conceded by Beaumont, who was, it should be noted, but little influenced by his fellow-poet in this matter:

"I would have shown  
To all the world the art which thou alone  
Hast taught our tongue, the rules of time, of place,  
And other rites." . . .<sup>64</sup>

Jonson first enunciates his views in his third comedy, *Every Man Out of His Humor* (1599). His earliest period, as has been pointed out by several critics,<sup>65</sup> is romantic. But in the play mentioned, the dramatist turns his attention, in a sort of running commentary on the work, to the problem of dramatic laws. Through his mouthpiece, Cordatus, he expresses repugnance for those "who are nothing but forme"—those who would wish in all things to follow unbendingly the "Terentian manner" of comedy. He is manifestly out of sympathy with devotees of "nice observation."<sup>66</sup> But on the question of the unity of

<sup>64</sup> Cunningham, Vol. I, p. ccxlv. Beaumont, *To My Dear Friend, Master Ben Jonson, upon his Fox*. Perhaps the completest avowal of Jonson's authority is that of Jasper Mayne:

"The stage was still the same, two entrances  
Were not two parts of the world disjoined by seas.  
There were land tragedies; no prince was found  
To swim a whole scene out, then o' the stage drowned;  
Pitched fields, as Red Bull wars, still felt thy doom;  
Thou laidst no sieges to the music room.  
Thy scene was free from monsters; no hard plot  
Call'd down a God t' untie th' unlikely knot."

(*Jonsonus Virbius*, idem, p. 451.)

This passage should be compared with Sidney's. It is, of course, Horatian in tone. Collate also the strikingly similar lines of Jonson's in *The Magnetic Lady*, end of Act I (Vd. below).

<sup>65</sup> By Lounsbury (op. cit.). Vd. also, Woodbridge, *Studies in Jonson's Comedy*.

<sup>66</sup>I append the passage under discussion:

M. Does he observe all the lawes of Comedie in it?

C. What lawes meane you?

M. Why the equall division of it into Acts and Scenes, according to the Terentian manner; his true number of Actors; the furnishing of the Scene with *Grex* or *Chorus*, and that the whole Argument fall within the compasse of a daies efficiencie.

C. O, no; these are too nice observations. . . . If those lawes

place his attitude is unmistakably classical, as an examination of the lines will show. The dialogue is between Mitis and Cordatus, who are discussing the drama in an *Inductio*:

M. O, the fortunate Iland? masse, he has bound himself to a strict law there.

C. Why so?

M. Well, we will not dispute of this now; but what's his Scene?

C. Mary, *Insula fortunata*, Sir.

M. He cannot lightly alter the Scene, without crossing the seas.

C. He needes not, having a whole Ilande to runne through, I thinke.

M. No! howe comes it, then, that in some one play we see so manye Seas, Countries, and Kingdomes past over with such admirable dexteritie?

C. O, that but shewes how wel the Authors can trauaile in their vocation, and out-run the apprehension of their Auditory.<sup>67</sup>

Here Jonson undeniably commits himself to the doctrine of place; and from the time of this declaration dates his advocacy of the rules. He is willing, it is true, to permit the whole island to be the "place," but this allows the theory but little extension and is in keeping with classical tradition. Professor Lounsbury, in commenting on the passage, points out that it ends up "with the first statement in our tongue of the assumed incapacity of the auditor to comprehend change of scene,"<sup>68</sup> an idea that furnished a ready entrance to the doctrine of verisimilitude. The tendency here expressed grew with Jonson into rigor.

From this standpoint Jonson never departed. It is true he was compelled in *Sejanus* to deviate from "the strict laws of

you speake of had been delivered to us *ab Initio*, and in their present vertue and perfection, there had been some reason of obeying their powers; but 'tis extant, that that which we call Comoedia was at first nothing but a single and continued Satyre. . . . I see not then but we should enjoy the same Licentia, or free power to illustrate and heighten our invention, as they did; and not bee tied to those strict and regular formes, which the niceness of a few (who are nothing but Forme) would thrust upon us." (Quoted from G. G. Smith op. cit.)

Here we have Jonson in a completely liberal attitude,—even to the denying of the unity of time. He does not think it needful that the whole Argument fall within a "daies efficiencie."

<sup>67</sup> Vd. G. G. Smith, *Eliz. Crit. Essays*, where the entire passage is given.

<sup>68</sup> op. cit. p. 30.



time," but for this lapse he amply apologizes in the Preface to the play:<sup>69</sup>

"If it be objected that what I publish is no true poem in the strict laws of time, I confess it: as also in the want of a proper chorus; whose habits and moods are such and so difficult as not any whom I have seen since the ancients; no, not they who most presently affected laws, have yet come in the way of. Nor is it needful, or almost possible in these our times and to such auditors as commonly things are presented, to preserve the old state and splendor of dramatic poems, with preservation of popular delight."

In speaking of the "popular delight," Jonson unconsciously hit upon a vital point in the attitude of the Elizabethan audience toward the dramatic unities. It was a "popular" audience, of decidedly old-fashioned and conservative desires with regard to the theatre. But, though Jonson repeated the thought in *The Magnetic Lady*, he refused to be swayed by the demands of the "general." His habit of conformity grew upon him, until, in *The Alchemist*, he produced his ideal of regularity.

The Prologue to *Volpone* (c. 1605) expresses Jonson's determination to adhere unbendingly to the rules:

"The laws of time, place, person he observeth  
From no needful rule he swerveth."<sup>70</sup>

Repenting of early sins, Jonson, in the later version of his *Every Man in His Humor*,<sup>71</sup> is careful to call attention in the Prologue, to his change of heart, and casts ridicule, in the manner of Sidney, on the rudeness of the English stage and its failure to preserve decorum. The dramatist sees, he says, that you are inclined

<sup>69</sup> Acted 1603, pub. 1605.

<sup>70</sup> Note, *persons*, not *action*. This is, it would seem, another form of the "decorum" idea with relation to types. The poet says, in the words of Corneille, "Qu'il a suivi surtout une unité de personnages." Cf. with the excerpt in the text, the words of Lodowick Barry (*Vd. infra*), "Observing all those ancient streams . . . as *time, place, person*."

<sup>71</sup> Original (c. 1597) printed 1601 in quarto. The Prologue is added to the folio of 1616.

"To make a child now swaddled, to proceed  
 Man, and then shoot up in one beard and weed  
 Past threescore years; or with three rusty swords,  
 And help of some few foot and half-foot words,  
 Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars,  
 And in the tyring-house bring wounds to scars.  
 He rather prays you would be pleased to see  
 One such today, as other plays shou'd be;  
 Where neither Chorus wafts you o'er the seas,  
 Nor creaking throne comes down the boys to please."

The reiterated censure of the defiance of the unities of time and place reaches the extreme of exaggeration in the lines appended to Act I of *The Magnetic Lady* (c. 1632):

Boy: . . . So, if a child could be born in a play and grow up to a man, in the first scene, before he went off the stage: and then after to come forth a squire, and be made a Knight: and that Knight to travel between the acts, and do wonders in the Holy Land or elsewhere: kill Paynims, wild boars, dun cows, and other monsters; beget him a reputation, and marry an emperor's daughter for his mistress: convert her father's country; and at last come home lame, and all-to-be-laden with miracles.

Dampley: These miracles would please, I assure you, and take the people: for there be of the people, that will expect miracles, and more than miracles from this pen.

Boy: Do you think this pen can juggle? <sup>72</sup>

The only other expression of Jonson's that we need consider

<sup>72</sup> Again, at the end of Act III, the *Boy* refers to the time limit,—“made her fall into her throes presently, and within that compass of time allowed to the comedy.” The English audience continued their desire for change over a long period. Professor Lounsbury (op. cit. p. 48), speaking of a later time, says: “It (the party against the unities) may be said to have had the secret sympathy of most of the spectators; at least it never incurred their hostility. It was not, indeed, dread of the hearers that made the English playwright observe the unities; it was dread of the critics.” That the sympathy of the audience was not always a “secret” is demonstrated by the change of scene that Garrick introduced into the representation of Whitehead's *School for Lovers*. In the Prologue to the play, Garrick says to the audience:

“Still he persists—and let him—*entre nous*  
 I know your tastes and will indulge them too.  
 Change you shall have; so set your hearts at ease;  
 Write as he will, we'll act it as you please.”

(Cited by Pye, *A Commentary Illustrating the Poetics of Aristotle*, 1792, p. 135.)

here, comes in his collection of miscellaneous notes and thoughts on criticism, called *Timber* or *Discoveries*.<sup>73</sup> Its importance rests in the fact that it takes up the unity of action, which the dramatist treats here for the first time. He asks, "What is the utmost bound of a fable?" and answers the query in terms entirely Aristotelian:

"It behooves the action in tragedy or comedy to be let grow till the necessity ask a conclusion; wherein two things are to be considered: first, that it exceed not the compass of one day; next, that there be place left for digression and art." And again, "The fable is called the imitation of one entire and perfect action, whose parts are so joined and knit together, as nothing in the structure can be changed or taken away, without impairing or troubling the whole, of which there is a proportionable magnitude in the members."

This reads very much like a free rendering of the original which the author intended to keep in mind, though he did not think it necessary to follow it, with any amount of rigor, in practice.<sup>74</sup> Having examined Jonson's pronouncements on the dramatic unities, we may now with advantage deduce his position in the controversy, and in addition, consider first, his indebtedness to foreign sources, and then his influence upon the opinion and practice of his contemporaries.

I believe there need be no hesitancy in deciding that Jonson is a classicist in so far as the minor unities are concerned.<sup>75</sup> His practice tends to support this opinion. "Jonson's treatment of the unities is consistent with his theories as far as the circumstances of his age would permit,"<sup>76</sup> and this reservation was reluctantly admitted, as we have seen, by Jonson himself. In the main he is scrupulous in his observation of the unities of time and place, though in his tragedies,—all of them historical,

<sup>73</sup> Pub. 1640, written c. 1630. Ed. by F. E. Schelling, 1892. Vd. p. 85.

<sup>74</sup>On the construction of *Timber*, see the Preface to Schelling's edition; also Professor Spingarn's article, *Mod. Phil.*, Vol. 2, 1905.

<sup>75</sup> Professor Lounsbury says: "It is difficult to determine Jonson's precise attitude." Cf. Woodbridge (op. cit. p. 6), e. g., "His theories are . . . more satisfying though narrower than Dryden's."

<sup>76</sup> Schelling (o. c., note to p. 85).

it should be noted,—the impossibility of adherence to his principles was apparent even to him.<sup>77</sup> In one other respect can Jonson be identified with the neo-classic tradition,—in his disregard for the unity of action. Its place seems to have been usurped for him by the “unity of persons” to which I have already referred. In his subversion of the major unity Jonson falls in with the attitude of his contemporaries. Several of the greater plays of Shakespeare, and some of the lesser, are marred by a too general neglect of this unity. The causes for this disregard, common to the majority of the Elizabethan playwrights, will be suggested below.

A few words will suffice to sum up Jonson’s indebtedness to earlier critical thought. The only other Englishman with whom we can institute comparisons is Sidney. That Jonson knew *The Apology* appears likely enough, and we have already called attention to the reiteration by the dramatist of Sidney’s fault-finding with the rudeness of the stage.<sup>78</sup> Jonson’s foreign rela-

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Woodbridge (p. 17): “The noteworthy thing is that in thus setting at naught a rule he had himself enunciated, Jonson was conforming to a higher law, founded on a fundamental distinction between tragedy and comedy.” Miss Woodbridge goes on to develop this fundamental distinction. Tragedy is a clash between will and law, “essentially grounded on time.” It demands movement, struggle, development. Comedy, on the other side, deals with “the fleeting aspect of things.” While this distinction appears warranted in a way, there is danger of over-emphasizing it. Our notion of “tragedy” is no longer Elizabethan; to the modern mind the tragic in *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, is so accentuated as virtually to demand the fifth act for recovery from painful sensations. Then, too, the Elizabethan tragedies are, in a broad sense, historical, and, as a Restoration dramatist asked, “Where can Brutus die but in Philippi field?” The chronicle play, the historical tragedy, can not be brought within the rules, whereas our tragedies of to-day, though the theme be Elizabethan and universal, present no difficulty to classical adherence. We are not plot-ridden to the extent that Shakespeare and Jonson were, and the modern dramatist who chooses to borrow an historical or literary tale, is enabled to depart from his source to a degree as far beyond the Elizabethan as the latter went beyond the Greek. The Greek audience knew the story, the Elizabethan demanded little but the story, and the modern theatre-goer is content to let the story take second place, in the interest of watching the revealing of character and “the clash of wills.”

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Spingarn: *Seventeenth Century Critical Essays*, Vol. 1, Intro. p. XIV.

tions are not so evident. What Professor Spingarn says in this connection seems probable,—“His (Jonson’s) knowledge of critical development on the continent was limited by his small French and less Italian,” and perhaps this fact would account for the wide disagreement in the reasoning on the unities, between the dramatist and the Italian neo-classicists. We hear nothing in our poet of the Italian “verisimilitude,”<sup>79</sup> or the wire-drawn arguments on the length of the theatric day,—and we may speculate on the proneness of our critic to such thinking, even had it been familiar to him. How far Jonson is indebted to Dutch scholars, the present writer is unable to judge.<sup>80</sup>

There remains but one point to cover in connection with Jonson, namely, his influence. From the fact of the widely recognized leadership of the critic, would naturally follow the inference that he did not preach in vain. At the very least, a greater consciousness of the rules is revealed after and during the period of his sway. There was, of course, no widespread eagerness to observe the unities, nor was such a result to be expected. Many who showed a disposition to praise, showed none to follow. As a matter of fact, Jonson’s outspoken disciples in this principle are but few, and none too faithful. Of these, the first in date (as far as I have discovered) is Lodowick Barry, who, in his play *Ram-Alley* (1611) says:

“Home-bred mirth our Muse doth sing;  
The satyr’s tongue and waspish sting,  
Which most do hurt when least suspected,  
By this play are not affected.  
But if conceit with quick-turn’d scenes,  
Observing all those ancient streams,

<sup>79</sup> The only thing that can be construed as a possible form of this is the allusion to “the apprehension of their Auditory” (see above).

<sup>80</sup> Professor Spingarn (*17th Cent. Crit. Essays*, Vol. 1, Intro. p., XVI ff.) makes much of this influence, nor is it unlikely. Of the Dutch he says: “While Italian critics were losing themselves in the quagmires of ‘metaphysical’ wit, the Dutch continued the earlier traditions of Italian classicism, inherited from the Aristotelian commentaries of Robortelli and Vettori and the systematic treatises of Scaliger and Minturno.”

Which from the Horse-foot fount do flow,  
As time, place, person, etc." <sup>81</sup>

This, of course, is strict Jonsonese. Another dramatist, Thomas Heywood, reveals a knowledge of the agitation for the unities. In his Preface of 1615 to the play *The Four Prentices of London*, written "some fiftene or sixtene yeares" earlier, Heywood thus expresses himself:

"It (the play) comes short of that accurateness both in Plot and Stile, that *these more Censorious dayes with greater curiosity acquire*. . . . That as Playes were then some fiftene or sixtene yeares agoe it was in the Fashion." <sup>82</sup>

This statement is of special interest in that it points out the growing desire for classical "decorum,"—a desire which is to be credited entirely to Jonson. Heywood again defends his refusal to join the standard in a later play, *The Iron Age, Part I*.

"this Poem: Which as it exceeds the strict limits of the ancient Comedy in form, so it transcends them many degrees; both in fulness of the Scene, an grauity of the Subject." <sup>83</sup>

Still another general reference to rules is found in the Prologue to Middleton's masque, *The World Lost at Tennis* (1620):

"This our device we do not call a play,  
Because we break the stage's law to-day  
Of acts and scenes." <sup>84</sup>

One of those dramatists who were unstinting in their praise of Jonson, but were unable or unwilling to follow his precept and his example, was Ford.<sup>85</sup> In the Prologue to *Perkin Warbeck* he gives voice to his consciousness of the difficulty that Jonson had already conceded in *Sejanus*. He knows of "limited scenes," would fain not "outrun the apprehension of his Auditory," but is helpless, as

<sup>81</sup> Prologue to *Eam-Alley or Merrie Trickes* (Hazlitt's Dodsley, Vol. 10, p. 269). The passage has already been compared with the one from Jonson's *Volpone*.

<sup>82</sup> Wks., London, 1874, Vol. II, p. 162.

<sup>83</sup> Idem., Vol. 3, p. 261. The play was printed in 1632.

<sup>84</sup> Wks., ed. Dyce, Vol. 5, p. 161.

<sup>85</sup> Ford wrote one of the commendatory verses in *Jonsonus Virbius, On the Best of English Poets, Ben Jonson, Deceased*. (Cunningham, IX, p. 467.)

“We cannot limit scenes, for the whole land  
Itself appeared too narrow to withstand  
Competitors for kingdoms. . . .”

The most thorough-going of Jonson's disciples is Richard Brome, whom we have already had occasion to notice. The younger dramatist always acknowledged the desirability of laws, though he was not in all instances faithful in observance to the rules of unity.<sup>86</sup> In the Epilogue to *The Love-Sick Court* he cries out against all errors of the theatre:

“Wishing as y'are judges in the cause  
You judge but by the antient Comick Lawes.  
Not by their course who in this latter age  
Have shown such pleasing errors on the stage,  
Which he [the author] no more will chuse to imitate  
Then they to fly from truth, and run the state.”<sup>87</sup>

It is well here, having reached the termination of the first part of our survey, to sum up the Elizabethan attitude. The main heads of this summary have already been indicated. It may be said that, in general, the position of the dramatist or critic of this age is one of indifference to the question of the unities; it is never a vital issue with him; so much so, that he is sometimes suspected, without warrant, surely, of having been in utter ignorance of the laws. Jonson's is the only sustained voice in defense of regularity, and even he falls far short of the invincible rigidity of the Italian or the later French attitude. We must ask ourselves, therefore: How is it that the English stage failed to come under the restraints to which the Italian and the French drama succumbed with such ease and servility? The answer seems to lie in the fact that the English tradition, still alive, still active, and as yet unconquerable, clashed with the foreign neo-classic tendency, and the latter went down to defeat. The mediæval miracle plays, mysteries, and interludes, crude, earth-born and acknowledging no restraints, were still rejoicing in much of their early vigor. The Elizabethan dramatist, even if he had wished, dared not turn his back upon them. They had long reigned the favorites of the

<sup>86</sup> E. g., in *The Sparagus Garden* (pr. 1640). Even here, Brome, in the Prologue, refers favorably to the “Lawes of Comedy.”

<sup>87</sup> Wks., Vol. 2, p. 86.

populace and the latter were steadfast in their allegiance. In France the peasantry had been compelled to give up this form of pleasure; but in England they had never surrendered their ancient performances;—neither the Black Death nor their Great War had made them forget. Thus, the crude dramas, born within the sacred portals of the Church, seemed to be endowed with something of its wondrous vitality. But, apart from the people, the purely literary tradition was discouraging to the foreign restrictions. As Professor Saintsbury puts it, "The huge mysteries of the Middle Ages, which ranged from Heaven to Hell, which took weeks to act, and covered millenia in their action, did at least this good to the English and some other theatres—that they familiarised the mind with the neglect of their verisimilitude."<sup>88</sup> So that the imagination, that "sovereign quickener," was left uncurbed, and under the wizard influence of such as Marlowe and Dekker and Shakespeare, it continued ranging, ever farther, seeking new lands and strange sights and novel experiences. No better illustration of this is needed than Shakespeare's reply—*The Tempest*—to the challenge of the critics,—and we can but hope that there *was* a challenge and that "*The Tempest*" is his reply.<sup>89</sup> Here the unities of time and place are intact, but the Poet has given Prospero a magic wand, and so the storm, and the shipwreck, and the whole fairy fabric are entirely credible, entirely possible and natural. As one commentator<sup>90</sup> says, "If a writer puts his hero on a magic courser that can

'Put a girdle round the earth  
In forty minutes,'

<sup>88</sup> *Hist. of Crit.*, Vol. 2, p. 88. Professor Saintsbury, in stressing this idea, forgets to mention the seemingly contradictory fact of the French miracle plays—coeval in origin with the English, of the same structure (sometimes even to minutiae) yet—and in this lies the distinction—without the vitality. This is due entirely to the difference in the social conditions of the lower classes of the two countries. For a fine statement of the case see Morandi, *Voltaire contro Shakespeare*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> We should not forget, of course, the influence of the romantic plays of Beaumont and Fletcher. See, for this, the admirable and convincing study in literary affiliation by Professor A. H. Thorndike, *The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare*, 1901.

<sup>90</sup> Pye (op. cit., p. 133).



it is no offense against the rule; but it would be a great one to make an army march from London to Edinburgh in one night."

How distressing this unbridled fancy, this insatiable "curiosity" was to Jonson we have already seen. He represents the reactionary spirit, and, indeed, it may be permitted us to think that there was a certain need for some such restraining influence. Not that it had been well if a check of censorship had been imposed upon the wonder-working flights of fancy. Indeed, I echo cordially the sentiment of the Marquise who wrote to Horace Walpole, "But for the failure of the three unities, far from being shocked by it, I approve of it, there result from it such grand beauties."<sup>91</sup> Yet it has been too customary, in our worship of these beauties, to lose sight of the desirability in all things of the eminently Greek virtue of measure,—and the unities are nothing if not a principle of measure.<sup>92</sup> Viewed from the standpoint of modern stage-craft, the Elizabethan plays are assuredly not above criticism for their defiance of the unities of place and action. As regards the remaining unity, the accusation so often repeated from Whetstone to Jonson, of the violent transgression of the time limit will hardly apply to the dramas under discussion. But I venture to say that, considered as plays for the stage, many of the finest Elizabethan dramas are marred by the continual and unsystematic changes of scene. They give one the impression of "moving pictures," of things seen through a kaleidoscope; they compel our curtain of to-day to rise and fall endlessly, and the intervals for scenic change prolong the work to disproportionate lengths. For us, the best of Shakespeare's tragedies—if we wish to know them in their entirety—must remain great closet-dramas, inimitable, gripping and Titanic, with the supreme perfection and the higher unity of a work of nature. Their poetry, endowed with a universality and an imaginative power truly sublime, reached the height of Elizabethan effort. Add to this their unfailing suggestiveness—

<sup>91</sup> The Marquise du Duffand in Letter of June 28, 1768. Her *Letters* 1810, Vol. 1, p. 244. Quoted from Lounsbury, *Sh. & Voltaire (Sh. Wars*, Vol. 2, p. 265).

<sup>92</sup> Vd. Professor Butcher as quoted on p. 2.

"Age cannot wither, nor custom stale their infinite variety"—and we know, partly, the wherefore of our awe. It is not necessary to believe, even if we were so disposed, that Shakespeare was free from the limitations of his age; and we know that, happily, a lack of restraint and measure,—an abandon to the new-born might of the imagination, to the craving for the novel and the miraculous, is characteristic of the time. That the bent was native and had been early instilled and carefully nurtured, served but to give it the greater strength.

The striking instance, however, of the tendency under consideration is that evinced by the Elizabethan treatment of the unity of action. It has been customary with critics to hold that this unity was generally assented to and preserved by dramatists as well as theorists. We have watched the subordination of the unity of action, beginning with Italian critical speculation and running through Elizabethan theory and practice.<sup>93</sup> That this disregard of Aristotle's prime law is a marked feature of many Elizabethan plays, including several of the best of Shakespeare's, can admit of no doubt, it appears to me. Nor is it difficult to find the causes that brought about the change. They are two-fold. In the first place, the unity of action in its strict Aristotelian acceptance, is far from the unity of a Shakespearean play as two things can possibly be.<sup>94</sup> The former springs from the controlling exigencies of the Greek theatre, as is universally admitted. The latter has the "loose unity" of a romantic work, for, as Professor Moulton says, "The Romantic Drama reproduces the whole of the Classical Drama without its limitations."<sup>95</sup> The Greek idea is, in the nature of things, definite, exclusive and centralized; the Elizabethan, equally in the nature of things, vague, unrestricted and irregular.

<sup>93</sup> Jonson is a good example for praxis as well as theory. To have included in this paper a detailed discussion of tragi-comedy—a broad highway leading to the transgression of the unity of action—would have led us far afield.

<sup>94</sup> Vd. L. Horton Smith, *Ars Tragica Sophoclea cum Shaksperiana comparata*, 1896.

<sup>95</sup> *The Ancient Classical Drama*, 1890, p. 433. This phrase must be taken with reservations in both its terms.

The second cause can now be looked into. Professor Lounsbury points out that the rise and development of the "love" motive had been perhaps most prominent in freeing the English drama from the tyranny of the unities. With this view I can hardly agree, for it seems to me that the theme of the natively independent love, so unlike the early French dramatic love-element, is but one of the concomitants of "romanticism."<sup>96</sup> For the Elizabethan neglect of the unity of action, or at the very least its sweeping departure from the Greek notion, we have already partly accounted, as one of the natural results of the tendencies of the age.<sup>97</sup> But, more definitely, may we not consider that the sources of the plays in the golden age of our drama would result in a natural and insuperable tendency to subvert the unity of action? The influence in this direction of the chronicle, of the English tale, of the Italian *novella*, must not be minimized.

We may sum up then by saying that, in all the three unities, the dramatists of our first period had drifted away from the Greek ideal—certainly not one of neo-classic rigor—in both spirit and letter. Nor, more happily, had the Italian tradition been able to sap the vigor and early might of our drama. The second period, however, was to be one of general conformity, under the more successful inspiration of French example and precept.

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(To be continued.)

<sup>96</sup> It might be added that the love system in Spain was, as in France, thoroughly under parental direction, yet the fact seems to have exerted no influence on the romantic drama of the former country.

<sup>97</sup> The thought that Professor Saintsbury emphasizes—that of the fundamental difference between the French and the English people with regard to submission to authority—must not be forgotten.